HOFFA STORY

By JACK NEWFIELD and MEL JUFFE

The former counsel of a House investigation into the murder of President John F. Kennedy yesterday called a mob lawyer's disclosures in The Post implicating Jimmy Hoffa and two Mafia chieftans in the assassination "the most plausible" explanation.

Lawyer Frank Ragano revealed exclusively in The Post yesterday that he carried an order to assassinate JFK from Teamsters boss Hoffa to New Orleans mob boss Carlos Marcello and Florida mob boss Santos Trafficante. Ragano served as a lawyer for both Hoffa and Trafficante.

"This is the most plausible, most coherent [assassination] theory," said G. Robert Blakey, who shaped the 1979 final report of the Select House Committee on Assassinations.

That report concluded that Trafficante, Marcello and Hoffa all had the "motive, means and opportunity" to kill Kennedy.

Ragano's testimony "would have strengthened the conclusions we reached," said Blakey.

The panel was "unable to establish direct evidence" of the trio's complicity, the report said. Ragano's revelations — while filling in the jigsaw puzzle of circumstantial evidence — still fall short of direct evidence, Blakey said.

Blakey, a former FBI agent, said that Marcello and Trafficante "were the two people we investigated in 1978 and 1979. They both are killers and Mafia members.

"They had every reason to hate the Kennedys. And when you take somebody who has access to violence, as they did, and hates with passion, as they did, what Ragano says is credible.

"His information does not differ from other information that came to us about Trafficante and Marcello," he added.

Blakey, who spoke to The Post from South Bend, Ind., where he teaches at Notre Dame's law school, went on:

"Do I believe what Ragano is now saying? The answer is yes.

"Do I believe he remembers the exact wordings of conversations? No," said Blakey, saying the talks were too long ago. "But I believe the substance of it."

He added: "Was he in a position to hear what he says he heard? Yes. Does what he heard ring true? Yes. Does he have a motive to lie? I don't think so."

Blakey said Ragano might be mistaken on one point — that Hoffa, in effect, gave a hit order to the Mafia chiefs.

Blakey, a former FBI agent, said he has detailed knowledge about Ragano's role as a well-connected mob lawyer and has even testified about it at court trials.

Meanwhile, Frank Mankiewicz, who was Sen. Robert Kennedy's press secretary, also declared yesterday that Ragano's account "is the most plausible [assassination] theory. It sounds reasonable to me."

Mankiewicz said he became "an assassination buff" after he "looked into it on assignment from Robert Kennedy in 1967 and 1968."

Another of Robert Kennedy's top aides, Adam Walensky, called for a new and improved version of the Warren Commission to investigate the murder.

Commenting on Ragano's revelations, Walinsky said, "I always thought that Marcello was the most likely suspect."

Mob expert Nick Pileggi said agano's description of a Hoffa-ordered hit "smells more right to me than all those other theories."

"You have men in organized crime who are more than capable of murder and who had the motive — tapping into the Teamsters half-billion-dollar pension fund," said Pileggi, co-author of the mob movie "Goodfellas."

"The Kennedys were driving the mob guys — as well as Hoffa — crazy. The mob figured if the Kennedys got rid of Hoffa, it would lose access to the pension fund."

G. ROBERT BLAKEY
Believes Ragano story.

FRANK MANKIEWICZ
'Most plausible theory.'

ADAM WALINSKY
Long suspected Marce

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